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ABSTRACT

In this paper, a college economics professor shares his ideas and experiences related tc teaching a regional economics course for seniors at Bucknell University. In an attempt to depart from the traditional content and the passive teaching procedures prevalent in such courses, the professor implemented a course in a regional, political, economic analysis of a nearby community. In the first part of the course which deals with preparation for field research, students read Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." The second part of the course involves field research experience and class dialogues. The students first identify a nearby community they wish to examine. They isolate and identify the community's major generative themes, i.e., what are people most ccncerned about and interested in. In addition, they examine and describe the economic base of the community in the context of its regional economic setting. It is in this part of the course that students learn and apply the elements of regional econcmic theory and technique. A Neo-Marxist conceptual approach is used. Students schedule meetings, interviews, tours and other such activities with the people in the community. They spend classroom time discussing their experiences and applying their theory. The course ccncludes with a written project report. The report is made available to, and discussed with, members of the community. (Author/RM)

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"A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL FOR REGIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY IN A RURAL-INDUSTRIAL ECONOMY: CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA & BUCKNELL UNIVERSITY AS A CASE STUDY"

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> "The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of students. His task is to fill the students with the contents of his narration --- contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity."[1]

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an effort on my part to share some ideas and experiences related to the teaching of Regional Economics which I have done for the past three years at Bucknell University. As will soon become evident, my growing frustration with both "orthodox" economics and traditional modes of instruction have been instrumental in creating my desire to attempt the experiment I am about to describe.

As one contemplates the plethora of events and trends taking place both domestically and internationally, it becomes necessary at some point to identify these various phenomena and, as educators, integrate them into the framework of our instruction. Obviously, to do this implies a risk that our perception of world events will significantly and fundamentally alter the content of what we teach as well as the way we teach it, i.e., the mode of instruction.

What specific events or trends have I been able to isolate as being historically "critical" to warrant this dramatic reflection? What has so fundamentally altered our objective social reality so as to challenge our economic theory and instructional methods? I have discerned the following to be of major importance: (1) The Prolonged Recession of the United States economy (2) An unprecedented Fiscal Crisis (3) Regional Decay and Demographic changes resulting in the growth of the "Sun-Belt" (4) The Energy Crisis as it relates in particular to the Economic Crisis (5) The General Crisis in Economic theory and failure of Policy.[2]

In failing to fully integrate these trends into our theories

and models, we are, as Robert A. Gordon has noted, sacrificing a good deal of relevance and shying away from some of the "big questions":

> "First, the mainstream of economic theory sacrifices far too much relevance in its insistent pursuit of ever increasing rigor. And, second we economists pay too little attention to the changing institutional environment that conditions economic behavior. We do not often enough re-examine our basic postulates in light of changes in this environment, and, perhaps more important, we shy away from the big questions about how and why the institutional structure is changing --- and where it is taking us."[3]

Regional Economics: Content and Mode of Instruction

Over the past several years, I have witnessed in the profession a growing trend toward the "application of theory." This trend reflects a sincere desire on the part of teachers and researchers to make theory relevant and to apply their research towards current problems. This is without question commendable. But, what is questionable is the theoretical framework and institutional context in which this theory is applied and policy implemented. I find that most economists are content to uncritically practice their economics (even when applied) within the confines of the mainstream paradigm. The primary emphasis even at the undergraduate level is upon developing, learning and applying the "proper" analytical-theoretical-quantitative tools and skills necessary to technically formulate the proper definition, description, and policy proposal for a specific issue or problem. Little if any interest or sensitivity has been shown in the political and institutional factors and considerations surrounding the issue or problem. This continued committment to the dominant orthodox paradigm has resulted in the repeated teaching of the standard core material that appears in different sequences in all of the introductory, intermediate and graduate level textbooks. Gazing at the Table of Contents of any Regional text, one is confronted with an unending list of topics: the growth of cities and regions, urbanization, suburbanization, agglomeration, location of firms, location of [illegible]e, transport costs, spatial hierarchies,

land-use patterns, rent gradients, growth poles, growth centers, central place theory, economic base analysis, input-output models, regional multipliers, cost-benefit analysis, etc. Occasionally, there is some effort to transcend theory and apply these concepts to contemporary problems. Witness the proliferation of texts attempting to integrate theory with policy by focusing upon standard problem areas such as: poverty, housing, finance, health, environment, land-use, education and transportation. The problem with this, from my perspective, is that these texts and their respective authors analyze these problems simply by demonstrating the power of microeconomic tools and the efficacy of Keynesian macroeconomic theory and policy with its implicit pluralistic political theory of the role of the government. Why is this so bad?

The orthodox approach from my point of view is subject to the following criticisms:

1) It is for the most part ahistorical.

2) assumes and takes for granted as an immutable given the existing political-economic institutions and the social relations of society thereby reinforcing the current status-quo and in a sense representing an apology for the present order.

3) excludes from serious consideration except in a descriptive manner the recognition and questioning of the distribution of income, wealth and power in society.

4) assumptions generally made ask us to examine issues and problems from the vantage point of static equilibrium analysis, competitive markets in land, labor and capital, primacy of private property and the private sector, and a pluralistic conception of the behavior of Government.

5) the utilization of theoretical, analytical and empirical categories characterized by "marginalist: neoclassical methaphysical characteristics that rarely lend themselves to meaningful verification or valuation.

With these considerations excluded from theoretical formulations, it becomes obvious how fragile indeed the assumptions are in teaching Regional economics. In addition to this critique of the content,

the orthodox mode of instruction is typically confined to the university classroom or the inner-sanctums of the Planning Agency or the upper floor of a downtown office building, all of which are far removed from the everyday reality of life and the problems being analyzed. My feelings with regard to this criticism are best stated by Paulo Freire, a noted Brazilian educator, in the following:

> "A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship involves a narrating subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness."[4]

In many ways this "narration sickness" Freire speaks about is similar to what he calls the "banking-concept of education." His plea is for educators to give up this stifling destructive method of teaching for a mode of instruction designed to creatively "liberate" human beings. His position is summed up in the following:

> Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world. Problem-posing education, responding to the essence of consciousness - intentionality - rejects communiques and embodies communication.[5]

In approaching my Regional Economics course at Bucknell, then, I found myself moved with two different decisions --- to make the course more relevant in terms of the changing institutional environment and to follow Freire's urging to creatively "Liberate" my students and myself. The challenge was to transform the content of my course so as to overcome the basic criticisms with respect to theory listed earlier and to simultaneously develop an alternative mode of instruction moving away from the passive "banking" method to the

active "problem-posing" method. This then was my primary objective. What follows is my experience.

THE BUCKNELL EXPERIENCE

The Setting: A Rural-Industrial Economy

Bucknell University is located in central Pennsylvania, in the town of Lewisburg. Lewisburg is approximately 60 miles north of Harrisburg the State Capitol. The Susquehanna river, Route 15 and Inter-State highway 80 are the basic reference points for locating the town and university. This is a beautiful country setting which deceptively harbors a large number of manufacturing firms in the many small towns separated by the vast expanses of rich agricultural land. Indeed, almost 40% of the labor force (in the Five counties that make up Central Pennsylvania) is employed in the manufacturing sector. Only 3.3% of the labor force is engaged in agriculture. For the Five County area, the remaining employment categories and percentages are as follows: construction 5.9%, services 29.5%, transportation 3.5%, Utilities 1.2%, mining .7% and other 2.3%.[6] Thus, is easy to understand the general description of the area as being a "rural-industrial" economy. In the context of this physical setting, Bucknell University has over the years remained at arm's length from the communities surrounding it, especially in terms of curriculum. Yet, there has always been the atmosphere and feeling that anyone who desired to create means of engaging the surrounding communities in their teaching efforts was not only free to do so but would be encouraged and supported by the university.

Fortunately for me, one of the few faculty who had availed himself of this opportunity was my department chairperson. Professor William Cooper had for years taught a senior level course in "Social Problems in Economics." This course was essentially an experiential field course designed to expose Bucknell's "sheltered suburban middle-class" students to the lives and realities of the people in the Central Susquehanna Valley. In terms of this objective, Professor Cooper's course was highly successful, but still remained one of the few real attempts by faculty to transcend the classroom.

I came to Bucknell in September of 1974. Since then every Fall Semester I have taught a course (Economics 321) like Professor Cooper's (designed to expose students to the area) but in the context of focusing upon Regional Economics in particular as opposed to Social Problems in general.

This course is made up of twelve selected seniors who are either economics majors or from related social science disciplines. Each student must have as prerequisites for taking this course the following: Introductory Economics, Intermediate Micro and Macro, and Urban-Rural Economics (which I teach).

The course organization and format is typically the following:

Part I Preparation for Field Research (Two weeks)

Part II Field Research and "Critical" Perspective on Regional Economic Theory (Eight weeks)

Part III Writing Project Report & Decoding Dialogues (Three weeks)

Part IV Evaluation (One week)

When we do the actual field research, we spend one day a week for approximately four hours away from campus. In addition, we meet twice each week for an hour on campus to process that which we have experienced in the field as well as learning some of the theoretical material.

In what follows, I will attempt to detail what it is that we do in each respective part of the course.

Part I: Preparation for Field Research

To initiate the course, I have always tried to share with the students the educational philosophy behind the course and why it is that we are going to be doing something quite different from what they have been accustomed to in their prior experience at Bucknell. To do this, we read Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and other material that is reflective of the basic analysis and themes found (now under one cover) in Bowles and Gintis Schooling in Capitalist America. This provides a new philosophical, pedagogical and methodological conceptual framework.

This "philosophy of education" in particular is based upon the following considerations:

(1) People learn best by doing and experiencing.

(2) People learn best by applying theory and practice, i.e., engaging in Praxis.

(3) Problem-posing education as opposed to the "banking method" of education is the most valuable.

(4) Education should be co-intentional. The student and teacher relationship is best when it is not an authoritative hierarchical antagonistic relationship.

(5) The teacher should be a facilitator and a co-learner with students.

(6) Meaningful education requires critical thinking and reflection.

(7) True education ought to develop human potential and creativity.

(8) A truly liberating pedagogy ought to foster humanistic values and attitudes.

In addition to educational philosophy, we spend time discussing moral and ethical implications related to community research. To do this, we read sections from Vidich and Bensman's SMALL TOWN IN MASS SOCIETY and Roland L. Warren's STUDYING YOUR COMMUNITY. With these two specific areas behind us, we then go to the actual field research experience.

Part II: Field Research Experience & Class Dialogues

It is first necessary for the group (team) to select the region and community they wish to examine. We normally spend a session or two riding around the area looking at various communities attempting to identify an area and specific community suitable for investigation. In the past, the students have selected the following: (a) Mt. Carmel, Pennsylvania located in the lower Anthracite Coal region approximately 35 miles from Bucknell (b) Shamokin, Pennsylvania located in the lower Anthracite coal region 25 miles from Bucknell (c) Milton, Pennsylvania located only 6 miles from Bucknell. Once a location is decided upon, we then move to the next

step in our process.

Thematic Investigation and Political-Economic Analysis

In the early going, we think of ourselves as "thematic investigators" trying to isolate and identify what seem to be the major generative themes in the community, i.e., what are people most concerned about and interested in. It may be local political corruption, high unemployment, inflation, religion, football, crime, education or flooding to name only a few.

In addition to identifying generative themes which are later to become focal points for dialogue and interaction with citizens, we, also, begin the process of examining and describing the economic base of the community in the context of its Regional economic setting. It is here that we essentially learn and apply the elements of Regional economic theory and technique. To present this orthodox material and perspective, I have typically used Edgar M. Hoover's AN INTRODUCTION TO REGIONAL ECONOMICS. But, in order to overcome the limitations of this approach used alone, I have relied upon several other source materials and alternative conceptual approaches.[7] These other materials present a critique of orthodox theory, alternative categories for analysis, an alternative conceptual framework and, lastly, an historical perspective. In short, the competing paradigm is a contemporary Neo-Marxist set of formulations. Some may be shocked that such an approach has a place in Regional economics. But, I have found that not only much of what Marx had to say is increasingly having more and more relevance in our contemporary society but in particular his materialist perspective is essential for being able to understand the historical development of regions. I am not alone in my respect for Marx and his contemporary relevance. Once again, from Robert A. Gordon in a recent address:

> Let us borrow what seems appropriate from Marx and his followers as well as from others, although what Marx had to say fitted 19th C. England much better than it does late 20th C. Western Europe or the U.S. But at least let us try to construct a model of the sort I suggest that will have something to say about the evolution and future of the kind of economy and society in which we live.[8]

In addition to this historical approach, we spend time examining other facets of neo-marxian political economy relevant to a more critical understanding of regional economics. From the literature of imperialism and uneven development, we utilize and apply new categories of analysis and concepts.[9] For example, when we were studying the coal towns of Northumberland County and reading simultaneously Harry Caudill's NIGHT COMES TO THE CUMBERLANDS and his latest book THE WATCHES OF THE NIGHT, we could see how these particular regions have been exploited, pillaged and reduced to an essentially "colonial" relationship with the rest of the United States. The people have existed in a state of poverty and deprivation characterized by "dependency" upon the Federal government by the maintenance and perpetuation of the Welfare State. Indeed, the parallels with the nations of the developing world are stark when one examines the Appalachian Region. A simple model examining the basic economic structure with respect to terms of trade, property ownership, capital flows, and public expenditures will easily validate this hypothesis.

Taking this additional theoretical material integrated with the orthodox, we then apply this to our field research and spend classroom time discussing our experiences and applying our theory.

What we normally do in the field is to schedule meetings, interviews, tours and other such activities with people in the community. For example, in the past we have arranged the following:

(1) Visit the local political and business leaders
(2) Visit the local Chamber of Commerce
(3) Visit the local Bureau of Employment and Welfare Office
(4) Visit the local Social Security Office
(5) Visit and tour plants and firms in the community, particularly those located in the Industrial Park
(6) Visit Local, County, Regional and State Development Associations and Planning Agencies
(7) Attend and observe local town meetings
(8) Visit with local religious leaders
(9) Visit and interview owners and patrons of local bars, clubs, restaurants, and civic or fraternal organizations
(10) Visit and survey local schools and other educational institutions

It is important to note that in this stage of actual field research, we make every effort to view ourselves as "outsiders" and responsibly face up to our preconceived prejudices stemming from our prior socialization. We communicate to the community at large that we are there to learn from them not to judge, evaluate, teach, or tell them what it is that they ought or ought not to do.

Part III: Project Written Report and Decoding Dialogues

While we are actively engaged in field work, in the classroom each week, we begin the process of organizing that which we have accumulated in the way of data and information. Individuals then begin to identify and accept responsibility for specific parts of the community study which the group had developed and agreed upon. The group consciously steers itself (as a team of social scientists applying Regional Political Economy to a particular community) toward this final goal of a collective writing project. A writing project that would essentially be a Regional Political Economic analysis of a community. For example, the Fall 1976 class decided to study Milton, Pennsylvania. They organized the research and writing project in the following manner:

Part I. Introduction: Objectives and Goals
Research Design and Methodology

Part II. Historical Perspective: Milton --- Past, Present and Future

Part III. Economic Base Analysis: Rural-Industrial Economy Description
Classification of Firms
Classification of Labor Markets
Central Business District
Industrial Park
Growth Determinants & Demographic Trends
Inflation, Unemployment & Business Cycles
Production Technology
Labor Relations & Wage Structures
Financial Institutions & Intermediaries

Part IV. Special Problem: Flood & Flood Recovery
Historical Perspective
Government Programs: Army Corps of Engineers
Cost-Benefit Analysis
Local Response
Future

Part V. Related Areas of Study

Education and Youth
Religion
Political Awareness
Housing
Attitudes toward Economic Planning

Part VI. Summary of Research Findings and Conclusions

Part VII. Project Report Recommendations

* Appendix
** Bibliography

Once the writing project is completed we do two things: (a) we make available this written document to all of the people we had contact with in the community while doing the study and (b) invite these same people to come to Bucknell for a luncheon where we make a group presentation of our Project Report and invite discussion. (At this luncheon we also present a slide presentation which we prepared on the community.) What has typically transpired after this session on our campus with community people is that some of us are invited to various places in the community to speak and share our thoughts, ideas, and findings with the community at large.

Part IV. Evaluation

During the last week of the semester, the class meets and engages in a rather intense evaluation. We evaluate the course, each individuals contribution and my (the teacher's) contribution. This evaluation process is done in the following manner: (a) each person in the class writes a "self-evaluation" and specify's the course grade he/she feels is deserved (b) then each self-evaluation is shared with two peers (usually people worked with closely on the project report) and myself. These people then either concur with the grade assigned or challenge it which would bring discussion and a final resolution of the issue. In addition to the self-evaluation, each student is required to keep a "journal" which is essentially a personal diary documenting their experiences, ideas and feelings throughout the semester as they relate to the field

research and class discussions. This "Journal" becomes an important part of the evaluation process. It is read by the two peers and myself.

Also, the student's individual section of the collective written Project Report is important in the evaluation process. It is judged on how well it did integrate theory with the research experience. Again this written material is read by the two peers and myself.

After we finish with the arduous task of individual evaluation and assigning grades (which normally turn out to be the same for all), we then discuss the course in general, in terms of how well it seemed to meet the objectives and goals established in the beginning. Part of this involves closely examining the role that I played in the course. Was I able to be a facilitator, co-learner and non-authoritarian figure? This then concludes the course.

FINAL THOUGHTS & REFLECTIONS

It works! Or, so it would seem. In the three years I have done this course, the students have responded positively. From my perspective, it has been better each time I have done it. This would indicate among other things that I am learning from my own experiences and able to incorporate what I learn into the course from one semester to the next.

The students have agreed that they not only <u>enjoy</u> the change in atmosphere because of the field research experience and the different relationship they have with me but, in addition they actually do learn economics while they are doing so. I have found that students always come away from the course with a renewed interest and appreciation for economics.

In their daily excursions into the "real world" most students found it refreshing to just experience people in their everyday lives. Quite quickly they perceived that the world does not operate in the same way that the "Ivy-tower intellectuals" always describe it. In short, students are able to make and experience

cognitions that I find almost impossible to communicate in a classroom setting. The most we can seem to accomplish in the classroom to abstractly intellectualize critical features of human behavior and society which sadly is not good enough.

More than anything else, what is encouraging to me is seeing students take control of their own learning. When given the chance, they accept the responsibility and enjoy the independence of creating their own learning and participating in it fully. In the process, they learn the virtues of self-discipline and collective cooperation.

I realize that my final thoughts and comments are all quite positive and glowing. This is not to suggest that there have not been problems. But, the problems have been few and minor to be honest; and, they have for the most part been easily resolved.

In closing, I would like to make clear that this has been a fantastic experience for me. It is an experience that has been successful because of many unique circumstances. This has not been an experience that could easily be replicated or emulated. Nevertheless, for those who feel the way I do about orthodoxy (in terms of teaching content and mode of instruction), I offer up this effort on my part as an indication of what is possible should you have the will to try and the situation appropriate for it. I am in no way suggesting that I have found the "truth" or the only way. At this juncture in time it seems to be what is right for me and what seems to be right for some students here.

So, I shall continue to refine and further develop this course. It is passages in student journals like this one that make me think that whatever the "hassels", it is worth it in the end:

> "Ya, know Steve, when we were in Shamokin last week, I sat down on a bench in the middle of town and started rapping with a 72 year old retired coal miner. We rapped for over three hours... in spite of breathing problems from that Black-lung stuff, he told me more things than I have learned at Bucknell in four years! That one afternoon was worth the $25,000... Certainly is something to think about?"